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NYC CRIME

‘Horror Island’: NYC politicians touring Rikers witness filth, overcrowding and inmate’s attempted suicide

By Graham Rayman and John Annese
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Welcome to “Horror Island” — where New York City inmates are confined in their own filth, staff doesn’t show up to work and one detainee tries to hang himself in full view of state legislators.

Shocked lawmakers touring Rikers Island Monday said they witnessed a detainee attempt suicide at the troubled jail complex in the midst of a “humanitarian crisis.”



Politicians hold a press conference to discuss Rikers Island Prison at Hazen Street and 19th Avenue in Queens on Monday September 13, 2021. 1126. (Theodore Parisienne) (Theodore Parisienne/for New York Daily News)

Assemblywoman Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas and state Sen. Jessica Ramos said they were visiting the intake area of the Otis Bantum Correctional Center when they came upon the inmate in distress.

“(He) jumped up, climbed the bars, and proceeded to bring a noose around his neck,” Gonzalez-Rojas told the Daily News. “I looked up, and I saw he was about to release himself from the bars and I kind of started yelling for the corrections



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defenders for a tour of the troubled jail reeling from a wave of correction officers calling in sick in unprecedented numbers.

Speaking at a press conference after the tour, the legislators said they came upon intake cells — where detainees are held upon arriving at the jail — crammed with a dozen or more men. Shower stalls doubled as cells and garbage covered the halls. Fecal matter, rotting food, urine and dead cockroaches littered the floor, they said.

Over the past 24 hours, several detainees were taken out of the intake units and moved into a gymnasium and chapel, sources familiar with Rikers said. But that wasn't enough to mask the problems.

Assemblyman Kenny Burgos (D-Bronx) said he'd just had a tour of "Horror Island."



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Even though the tour was planned in advance, he noted, “They still could not shield the atrocities that go on on this island. You cannot sugarcoat this.”

About 6,000 people are currently housed in city jails, more than double the population in July 2020. Meanwhile, Rikers has seen a wave of mass absenteeism by correction officers.

[Officials said that in July](#) about 3,500 out of 8,500 correction officers either called in sick or were medically exempt from working with detainees, while another 2,300 simply didn’t come in to work at some point during the month.

Ten [detainees have died](#) in the system since December, a huge spike over 2019 and 2020.

The elected officials went in three groups, touring OBCC, the Anna M. Kross Center and the Robert N. Davoren Complex.

Alice Frontier of the Neighborhood Defender Service said she saw detainees in an intake unit that was made up of two-by-six-foot shower stalls.

“They’ve given them plastic bags to use for feces and urine. And they are sitting in these cells with their own bodily waste,” she said. “This is the most horrific thing I have ever seen in my life.”

A Correction Department spokesman did not dispute any of the legislators’ accounts.





Politicians hold a press conference to discuss Rikers Island on Monday, Sept. 13, 2021. (Theodore Parisienne)
(Theodore Parisienne/for New York Daily News)

The legislators called for Gov. Hochul to sign legislation limiting the range of parole violations that can send people back to prison. They also called for prosecutors to stop sending defendants to jail if they can't make bail.

“What we saw today was horrific,” said Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani (D-Queens). “This is a crisis and this is a crisis of our own making. This can be dealt with by prosecutors who need to stop sending people to Rikers Island.”



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Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani (Theodore Parisienne/for New York Daily News)



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Mamdani said he met one man who had been in intake for seven days without access to a bed or a toilet. Inmates are supposed to be held in intake units for 24



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The legislators' tour was almost delayed by a de Blasio administration official who told the group they'd need an appointment first, despite a law allowing state

lawmakers to visit at their "pleasure." The city reversed course over the weekend after The News [reported the delay](#).

"If this was happening anywhere else in any other country, the U.S. would call it a humanitarian crisis," state Sen. Alessandra Biaggi (D-Bronx) said. "It is unsafe for everyone. There's no wonder why correction staff doesn't want to come to work."

Correction officers union president Benny Boscio, who crashed the press conference at the end of the event, criticized the elected officials for focusing their legislation on the jail's detainees instead of the correction officers.

"Inmates are suffering. Correction officers are suffering," Boscio said. "And they wonder why we not coming to work. Assaults on my members are through the roof.... No bills are being introduced for the well-being of correction officers."



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